

## Homily for Christ the King

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2021

By Malcolm Wearing

My guess is that although you can probably name quite a few emperors, you probably don't know the names of many middle ranking Roman officials. But I am sure most churchgoers know the name of one or two them. The first is Quirinius, who if you have been listening at the carol service each year, you will know was governor of Syria when the great census was taken, which got Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. The second is Pontius Pilate.

But why does this Roman bureaucrat receive so much attention, when he only appears in a very small part of the Gospel accounts? Well, since the council of Nicea, back in 325 AD, Pilate's name has been recited in church services on a weekly, and in many cases daily basis, so it is no wonder we have all got familiar with it. *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.* But why do we focus so heavily on this man, why does Pilate deserve mention in every service, when others who were equally responsible for Christ's crucifixion, only get mentioned at Passiontide?

I think in this regard, Pilate is a victim of the church growing up and becoming a Roman institution. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Constantine summoned a council at Nicea to agree what Christians believed. To get round the potential for arguments in the future about when and if all these events really happened, those at Nicea decided to nail it all to a bit of history, which in Roman eyes was definite, the name of the Governor of the province at the time, and thus Pilate was immortalised in history, probably not in the way he would have wished.

There are two people in the passion story who I think get very hard treatment. The first is Judas Iscariot, we haven't time to go into why I think that now, the second is Pilate. I think we tend demonise Pilate (and Judas for that matter) for failings we all have in ourselves. To me Pilate seems like a man trying to do his best in difficult circumstances, and in the end failing to intervene when he really should have done. How many times have we all failed to do the right thing because it was too difficult? The province he was in charge of at the time must have been a nightmare. He was trying to maintain order over a very volatile nation, a once proud nation humbled and broken under numerous occupations, but who had frequently

and quite recently revolted against the occupying forces. Revolt was very much in the air; there was bitter theological disagreement amongst the religious sects (like the Sadducees and Pharisees) and to top it off the Puppet Kings supported by Rome, the Herodians, were unstable and untrustworthy. Being Governor, I think, may have been a poisoned chalice.

Pilate seems to be trying to do the right thing. He seems to truly want to understand why Jesus is being accused, but all along is faced with a man who refuses to help himself and eventually Pilate becomes resigned to doing the thing which will cause him least disruption and inconvenience.

But why was Jesus so obstinate? Why did he make Pilate's job so hard?

Well I think it goes to the heart of what we celebrate this week; Sunday is dedicated to Christ the King. Jesus was, is and always will be King, but not the kind of King that the world recognised, or Pilate recognised. In fact, none of the characters in the Gospel really recognise what Jesus' ministry is all about. They were all looking for someone who would conform to what it means to be a success in earthly terms, not seeing that Jesus' whole ministry was to show that earthly power, earthly prestige, and earthly riches meant nothing. The kingdom Jesus would reign over would be far greater, everlasting and perfect. In that Kingdom the prestige and comfort of some would not be bought at the expense of the degradation and poverty of others. Status in that Kingdom would be based on love, kindness, generosity and faith, not ambition, ruthlessness and violence.

In failing to interact with Pilate, Jesus makes the ultimate rejection of worldly authority. He shows that it is not important to him in any way, that he is prepared to die rather than interact with this authority, that he is not in thrall to the power the world could offer him, nor tied to earthly prestige or promise of riches. Maybe that should be a message to us too.

It is easy to be lured into thinking that prestige, authority and wealth in this life are so important, it doesn't matter what we do to get them. We can sometimes carefully avoid thinking about those we may have hurt to get our own way, to get what we want and desire.

But I think there is another strand in Jesus' obstinacy, and that goes back to those temptations in the desert at the very beginning of his ministry

on Earth. The devil offers Jesus all the Kingdoms of the world and suggests to him that even if he throws himself off the pinnacle of the temple, he won't be hurt. In other words Jesus doesn't have to follow that road to the cross. Tempting him to take the easy route.

The easy route that would lead to glory, to acclamation, to earthly success, and power. The route that would have had great material benefits. More of the lame would have been cured, more of the blind would see, Israel may have been freed from oppression. Jesus would have been a benevolent and good leader. But also a failure!

Because he came to show those then, and us now, that earthly kingdoms, this earthly life, are just a pale and poor foretaste of that great Kingdom he has given us hope to see. And I wonder if he was still anxious when he stood before Pilate, that his resolve may falter. Remember only hours before he had wrestled with doubts in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging God the Father to take the cup from him. Was this unhelpful interaction with Pilate a way of making sure that Jesus' natural goodness, which I think Pilate recognised, didn't convince him to set Jesus free, and ruin the arc of his mission?

Jesus came to live as one of us, to be like us, but was crowned a king unlike anything Earth had known. He rejected all that was important on Earth to focus on what was truly important, love, kindness, generosity and faith. If we are to be his loyal subjects, we must do the same.